

How The Book Club Led Me To Enlightenment

by Bob Simon

I have decided to describe how I reached an insight from a recent book club meeting discussion.

For November 2017, I chose as my book club selection *Dharma Bums* by Jack Kerouac. During the meeting Tom Genoni asked “What is enlightenment?” I did not respond at the time but Tom’s question got me thinking, “How could I answer Tom’s question?”

Tom’s question made me assess my life’s experience with spiritual matters, which has led me to an answer to Tom’s question that I would like to share with the club.

Let me give you a brief history of how I came to answer Tom’s question.

Although both my parents were raised in the Jewish faith, neither of them were what I would consider devoutly religious. Although we observed the basic practices; attending temple on Friday nights, Sunday School religious education to be confirmed a Jew, and a bar mitzvah at age thirteen to become initiated into the faith, I noticed that my Dad and sometimes my Mother would attend a spiritual church affiliated with Science of Mind after they dropped us off at Sunday school.

They also were part of a group of free thinking intellectual friends in Fort Worth, with whom they partied and discussed ideas. I realized early on that my parents had broken from the belief and social parameters of strict Jewish practice.

My Dad made me an unwitting participant on his pursuits as a seeker of greater spiritual knowledge and mindfulness. He knew Norman Vincent Peale and advocated his teachings on the power of positive thinking, so I was imbued with Dad's strong commitment to the belief that by using positive thought one could control one’s destiny. Dad exposed the family to all areas of metaphysical and occult knowledge, including para physical phenomena, like flying saucers and alien encounters. For example, when my parents drove us to California in the summer of 1957 we visited both the newly opened Disneyland and the Rosicrucian Egyptian Temple in San Jose.

During college, Dad introduced me to Silva Mind Control and I began to understand that one could learn how to control one’s thoughts.

While at University of Texas I began reading occult/theosophical writers like Hesse, Castaneda, etc. But, the most interesting book I read was New Model of the Universe by P. D. Ouspensky, a writer, philosopher, esoteric mathematician, and follower of G. I. Gurdjieff. I also

read a bit of Ouspensky's The Fourth Way, so I became acquainted with the Theosophical Society.

After graduating from Law School I took a one year international student internship in Sweden in 1970. During that year I further explored the occult by borrowing books from Lucis Trust's Arcane School Library in London, England and became fairly familiar with the principals of Theosophy and the occult writings of the early 20th century.

In 1972 when I returned to Fort Worth, Dad and I attended weekly meetings of proponents of the teachings of Edgar Cayce, the great para normal seer, where we discussed Cayce's teachings and held a short fifteen-minute meditation.

As I began to join other groups of young people my age who meditated, I began to realize that my Dad's search for a religion with a spiritual cosmology, such as Science of Mind was not the path I wanted to follow. Looking for manifestations of spirit in the physical world was an exercise that took one outside one's own consciousness and mind. Rather than seeking knowledge outside oneself, the key for me was to find a way to transform myself into a spiritually aware person through controlling my mind.

I became aware, perhaps through psychedelics, that I could induce a heightened energy level that opened awareness to a spiritual level of energy. I thought that through mediation I could achieve spiritual awareness without drugs.

At UT in the late 60's Bill Simmons, a friend from Highland Park who was one of the first hippies in Austin, gave me Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind by Shunryu Suzuki, which introduced me to zen and the Zen Center in San Francisco. In the early 70's I re-acquainted myself with one of my high school friends, David Chadwick, who had gone to San Francisco in the 60's and become an early student of Suzuki. While visiting him at his Mom's home for Christmas one year David invited me to spend some time at the Zen Center, "Why don't you come on out." (David has since become the primary biographer of Shunryu Suzuki)

So I did. I spent a week in the summer of 1976, living and meditating at the City Center zen monastery and visiting Green Gulch in Marin County.

I think I stayed again at the City Center in 1979 and ate a meal at the Zen Center's newly opened Greens Restaurant in Fort Mason Center, one of the first gourmet vegetarian restaurants in the U.S.

I have always loved good food. My mother founded one of the first cooking schools in Texas in the 1960's. She was acquainted with many of her generation's great gourmet cooking teachers, Julie Dannenbaum in Philadelphia, Helen Corbitt at Neiman-Marcus in Dallas, Julia

Child in Boston, and most particularly Julia's co-author of Mastering the Art of French Cooking, Simone Beck, whose compound Simone shared with Julia Child in Provence, mother visited several times.

How many circular connections there are in life. Deborah Madison, the famous vegetarian chef and cookbook writer, who now lives in Santa Fe, was a zen student at City Center for eighteen years and the first chef at Greens.

I practiced law and meditation in Albuquerque after I moved to New Mexico in 1982. I soon joined Rev. Brian Taylor's contemplative prayer group at [St. Michael & All Angels Episcopal Church](#), who practiced a very pure form of zen practice for years, including weekend sessions in a zendo he built in his back yard. I loved sitting with his group for ten or fifteen years until he decided to turn his practice toward a more church sanctioned and oriented training for Christians who wanted to teach contemplative prayer. At that point Kris Johnson, who was a student of the Zen teacher Joko Beck, and I started a sitting group of three or four at the Quaker Meeting Hall. After another fifteen years Kris and the others retired, but I still sit with one other person there every week.

So, back to Tom's question. I thought about Kerouac's enlightenment breakthrough he described in Dharma Bums, sitting in the woods behind his mother's house during his period of intense contact with zen in 1956. Kerouac's energized awareness that all things are united in time and space hit me as the enlightenment experience of the Buddha and also connected to Ouspensky's description of dimensions. It occurred to me that there was a simultaneity between Ouspensky's third and fourth dimension or the time space continuum and the Buddha's four noble truths:

Wikipedia states: The Four Noble Truths comprise the essence of Buddha's teachings. They are the truth of suffering, the truth of the cause of suffering, the truth of the end of suffering, and the truth of the path that leads to the end of suffering).

This insight seems to answer Tom's question. The "suffering" the Buddha described is in reality the confusion and anxiety caused by simultaneously living in both the third and fourth dimension that Ouspensky described. The Buddha's first and second noble truths.

Therefore, enlightenment or the end of suffering in Buddhism is the ability to bring into balance the awareness that we exist in the third "here and now" dimension" while simultaneously traveling through the fourth dimension "the time space continuum".

This is an essential principle of Buddhism; being in the moment, while everything is constantly changing.

We touch enlightenment when we become aware that our consciousness/mind is physical and spiritual energy in this moment of infinite time and space, as Kerouac described it. By increasing our energy, we can achieve linkage of physical and spiritual awareness. I have achieved this dual awareness or enlightenment momentarily by regulating my breathing to slow my heart rate and observing my thoughts through proper posture in a meditative state of mind. The result is a calmness I call "peace of mind", which I am convinced everyone can achieve. The Buddha confirms it. The recognition of and path to enlightenment are his third and fourth noble truths.

To put it in the context of European thought, **"the human Mind is a part of the infinite intellect of God."** - *Baruch Spinoza*



1957: Bob Simon, age 11